

“THE CHURCH OF THE TWENTY FIRST CENTURY WILL BE THE CHURCH OF THE THIRD WORLD.” DISCUSS THIS STATEMENT BY EVALUATING THE INCREASING IMPORTANCE OF THE NON-WESTERN CHURCH IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY.

Name: E Philip Davis

Module: 1005

Tutor: Dr L Wilson

Date: 30/3/05

1 Introduction

The global growth of Christianity in the twentieth century is one of its most dramatic features, and one often ignored or underplayed by those in countries where adherence is declining as in the UK. The growth has been concentrated in the poorer countries often called the “Third World” outside the zone in Europe and North America where Christianity historically developed. This pattern will have a profound influence on the activity of the church in the 21st century.

2 The number of believers

There are estimated to be 2 million Christians in the world at present, according to the website www.adherents.com, compared with 558 million in 1900 and 81 million in 1500. What these figures mask is the growth in percentage of the population as well as in absolute size. The estimate for 1500 represented 19% of the world while 2000 is 35%. As regards individual continents, there were estimated in 2000 to be around 350 million Christians in Africa, 300 million in Asia and 570 million in Latin America compared with a perhaps optimistic 431 million in Europe and 250 million in North America. Accordingly, there is a preponderance of the Third World in the world church today, even as the church has grown.

A pattern of growing dominance by the Third World is clearly shown by the table below which indicates regional shares of the total number of Christians in the world (columns add to 100%). This indicates a major decline in the share of Europe in World Christianity, mirrored to some extent in North America and offset by a major rise in the share of Asia, Africa and Latin America. Growth in the share of Asia and Africa has been particularly dramatic, fivefold for Asia and tenfold for Africa.

Table 1: The share of Christians in the world total

Region	1900	1925	1950	1975	2000
Africa	1.7%	3.2%	5.9%	10.2%	17.9%
Asia	3.7%	5.0%	6.5%	7.8%	17.1%
Europe	70.7%	62.4%	52.9%	42.6%	27.9%
Latin America	11.5%	15.2%	19.2%	23.2%	25.0%
North America	11.4%	13.1%	14.3%	15.0%	11.0%
Oceania	0.8%	1.0%	1.1%	1.3%	1.1%

Source: Long (1997)

3 An evaluation of the increasing importance of the non-Western church

At a basic level, the key background features for this development are threefold. First is the change in the balance of the world's population as birth rates declined in the West (and World Wars took their toll) while in the Third World medical advances and a slow reaction of birth rates led to a population explosion. This will continue for some time in the 21st Century. Christian numbers have accordingly grown alongside non-Christian – but this does not explain the growth in *share* of Christianity.

Second, and a factor helping to explain the growth in share, is the success of Western missionary endeavours following the Great Commission (Matthew 28:19). We shall evaluate the missionaries' contribution below.

A third and related explanation for growth is the translation of the Bible into an increasing number of languages. In 1900 the Bible was available in only 118 languages while in 2000 it was 310, while the number of partial translations rose from 517 to 2000. As in Acts 2:11 this has enabled individuals to hear “the wonders of God in our own tongues” so salvation becomes “no longer an offering from an alien culture but an offering from within the culture” (Noll 1997, p310) – a wholly positive development.

Note however that neither of these “missionary” factors would be successful without God’s own grace and mercy, and desire for all the world to worship him, as expressed for example in Genesis 12:3 and Daniel 7:14.

A further, undesirable factor promoting the real prevalence of the church in the Third World which is the decline in church adherence in the West. Ash (1998, p76) comments that "the total Christian population of the U.K. was estimated to be 37,394,000 in 1995, but...the population who regularly attend church services...is just over 6,000,000. Even taking into account other denominations in the UK, there is clearly a wide gulf between thought and deed. " This gap is not present for Third World believers.

Having seen the numbers and noted some key background causes, we may turn to a deeper assessment and evaluation of the growth in the Third World church and its implications for the 21st Century. At a cost of excessive generality, in our view it is best to focus on overall trends rather than going country by country. Nevertheless, some individual country examples will be brought forth.

The church has grown in many Third World countries through and even despite persecution. The church in China is a case in point. Following overwhelming persecution, by the end of the Cultural Revolution it seemed that Christianity was all but extirpated. But since then China has seen a massive growth of Christianity, from an indigenous base, see Lambert (1999) and Brother Yun and Hattaway (2002). The church there – as in other countries where communist persecution was severe, such as Russia and Eastern Europe - has grown strongly despite ongoing persecution, as it did in the first few centuries of its existence. Such a church will in my view be stronger and purer in its faith and doctrine for the 21st Century than our established Western churches, even as the church of Smyrna in Revelations 2:9 “I know your

afflictions and your poverty--yet you are rich!" as compared to the lukewarm church of Laodicea in Revelation 3:16.

The role of missionaries in the growth of the Third World church has been a complex one. It is clear, as in China above, that they were essential to sow the seed of Christian growth and revival. Furthermore, they introduced what Lion (1990) calls "disruption of order in the traditional non-Western societies and brought a new desire for development", for example recruiting Indian untouchables, even as Christianity itself grew among slaves and the downtrodden at its inception. Such a trend seems to me wholly in line with the biblical view of the equal value of all men (Galatians 3:28 for example).

In some countries there has been excessive dependence on Western missionaries. The church has been seen as a Western faith and the mission is identified by a white face. There has been a need to develop a self-supporting indigenous church, with the missionaries being partners rather than leaders. Only late in the century did it become "self evident to the missionary agencies that a reduction in foreign missionaries may be needed to facilitate a national churches growth in self reliance and release resources for unevangelised areas" (Lion 1996, p644). The example of China above, where missionaries left by force majeure, shows how God will bless an indigenous church.

Missionaries did not merely dominate church hierarchies but also brought a Western approach to Christianity that was not always helpful in the Third World. Notably, there is reduction of the gospel to a spiritual message and failure to be concerned with social righteousness, contrary to God's concern for justice for the poor as in Amos 2:7. It suggests a key challenge of the churches is to search for a biblical position of Christian mission that "involves the totality of human life in personal, social and public aspects". In many cases missionaries also

took a cessationist view of the gifts of the Holy Spirit (following 1 Corinthians 13:8) making the church highly unattractive to non-Western peoples.

Two responses can be traced to these patterns. First is the rise of liberation theology has been an important aspect of church growth in Latin America. This grew from the poverty of the people of Latin American countries. The Second Latin American Episcopal conference in Columbia in 1968 concluded “these poverty stricken people needed to be liberated from oppressive social structures and allowed freedom to live” (LBC 1999, p213). Liberation theology, which grew out of this, incorporated Marxist ideas of the class struggle, against capitalism. Salvation was to be seen as political liberalisation of the poor. The Catholic Church, rightly in my view, warned in 1984 that Liberation Theology threatened to downplay too much liberation from sin as opposed to poverty, and a naïve use of Marxist concepts. But it praised liberation theology for helping the poor, even as the Jerusalem church did Paul in Galatians 2:10.

Second, the Pentecostal movement which began in the US has been a major force in the development of Christianity in the Third World, notably Latin America and Africa. We can define it as a stream within the Christian faith that places a personal experience of the Holy Spirit (speaking in tongues, gifts of the Spirit including healing) high among the marks of a Christian. By being separate from the mainstream denominations, Pentecostalism has facilitated growth by being an indigenous movement that is also in line with traditional non-Western views of the importance of the spirit-world as well as the material one, and also spontaneous and lively worship. In my view it is a positive development that has actually fed back and helped to reenergize the moribund churches of the West via the charismatic movement.

There have remained limits to the growth of the church in the Third World. Persecution can be too strong as in North Korea, where a church of several million has been reduced to 10,000 believers, often in prison under threat of death (although a “thaw” may well lead to a massive revival). There remain a number of unevangelised areas, notably in the Middle East and North Africa, as well as in areas of countries with a sizeable Christian population, such as Kashmir in India. Church growth has been strongly resisted by Islam, especially in the last decades of the 20th Century. Christianity has been most successful in replacing animist religions, and where communism has fallen, atheism, rather than in converting individuals from other world faiths.

Indeed, in evaluating growth of churches in the Third World, it should be noted that religious revival has not merely been confined to Christianity. Recent decades have seen revivals of Islam in countries such as Malaysia, Indonesia and Iran as well as Buddhism in South East Asia, Hinduism in India and Judaism in Israel. These have been an aspect of the resistance to growth of Christianity in much of the world. Developing this point further, church growth in the Third World has led to a number of conflicts, notably with Islam in countries such as Indonesia and Sudan. We have come to be familiar with praying for the “suffering church” in a way that was not a feature when it was largely confined to “Christendom” in Europe.

Abstracting from such opposition, the church in the Third World faces a number of structural and doctrinal problems in and of itself. One is syncretism, whereby in some countries Christianity is not only legitimately expressed through local cultural patterns but has only supplemented rather than replacing local folk customs that may be entirely opposed to Christianity (such as spiritism, polygamy and voodoo). There is a risk of being “led astray by false gods, the gods their ancestors followed” as Amos 2:4.

Second is the issue of disunity in the body of Christ. In Africa, a hundred new groups are founded each year (Lion 1990). Individualistic leaders have freely set up their own churches, with no concern for unity, against Jesus' expressed desire in John 17:21-22. But we should recall that missionaries that brought Christianity showed a poor example, so the church was split by imported divisions from the beginning. Disunity may also be a consequence of politics and persecution; in China, there has been disunity in the church as to how to respond to the state, as some agreed to join the Three Self state sponsored church while others wished to be independent, and hence under greater threat of persecution, notably in the house church movement. But as noted, this has not prevented growth.

Furthermore, there are some positive aspects of independent churches as they may be better suited to local conditions. In Africa independent churches are often Bible centred communities that seek continuity with the church of Acts in terms of power, gifts and healing, and a radical break with witchcraft, that unlike the Western offshoots they take very seriously. Independence, in other words, can help to overcome the imported Western misconceptions brought by the missionaries and bring the church closer to Biblical Christianity.

Also, the development of bodies such as the World Council of Churches has led to strides forward in church unity in the 20th century that we may hope will continue in the 21st. These bodies have very much reflected the growing weight of the Third World churches in their composition.

4 Conclusion: some further signposts for the church of the twenty first century

We have highlighted a number of pointers from the 20th Century for the church of the 21st. We suggest on balance that these are highly positive ones, notably focus on the whole person,

including both spiritual (including charismatic) and social aspects, and a focus on biblical principles. Bible translation seems likely to prolong a dynamic process where Christianity pervades the entire society. There remain challenges, notably syncretism, disunity and spreading the Gospel where Islam is entrenched. We conclude with two further influential aspects which can be seen in their infancy as the 21st Century commences.

A first will be the growth of mission from the Third World churches. They benefit from larger manpower than the West. Such missionaries are obviously better suited than Western missionaries to operate in their own countries, as they have “fewer cultural barriers to cross, understand the geography, politics and economics of their area better, and their ministries cost less” (Long 1997). But also there will be a growing desire of Third World missionaries to impact on other countries. Two examples are first, the growing number of African missionaries to Western countries, such as Arnold Muwonge from Uganda, who has a mission in Manchester – essential given the decadence of the church in the West highlighted above. Another is the desire of Chinese missionaries, fearless given decades of persecution at home, to bring Christ to the Middle East, the “Back to Jerusalem movement” (see Brother Yun and Hattaway 2002). By doing so they see themselves as bringing Christ’s return nearer.

A further aspect is the growing assertiveness of the Third World churches within the worldwide movement. We may cite here the opposition of the African Anglican churches to the growing liberalism of the Western sister churches to homosexuality among the clergy as an example. The broader, very positive, point could be a stronger adherence to fundamental biblical principles more generally by the Third World churches, which are younger in the faith and less encumbered by wealth and possessions.

Bibliography

- Ash R (1998) "The Top 10 of Everything 1999". New York: DK Publishing
Brother Yun and P Hattaway (2002), "The heavenly man", Monarch Books
LBC (1999), "Introducing church history – 1005 text notes", London School of Theology
Lambert T (1999) "China's Christian Millions", Monarch Books
Lion (1990) "Lion Handbook: The History of Christianity", Lion Hudson
Long J D (1997) "Megatrend 1: Southward shift of Christianity" www.globalchristianity.org
Noll M A (1997), "Turning points", Inter Varsity Press

Word count 2453 including Bible Texts.